WHITNEY
MUSEUM
OF
AMERICAN
ART

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WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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Sixtieth Anniversary Celebration

October 30, 1991

honoring

Flora Miller Biddle

and

Brendan Gill

Introduction

LOOKING BACK at the first sixty years of the Whitney Museum of American Art, I inevitably think of those who have preceded me as its President. Their bold leadership and unstinting commitment to the institution, often at great personal sacrifice, fill one with awe and admiration. Among them were the Museum's founder, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, her daughter Flora Whitney Miller, and her granddaughter Flora Miller Biddle. The recent election of Flora's daughter Fiona Donovan as a Trustee represents the fourth generation of the Whitney family to serve the Museum.

People have a fierce loyalty to the Whitney that comes from feeling part of a family. This is what has always attracted our Trustees to the Whitney—as well as our staff, artists, patrons, members, and the public—and is, I believe, among its most valuable assets. Despite changes in program, location, and leaders, the sense of family remains a quintessential part of the Museum.

Flora Miller understood the need to broaden the Museum's base of support, and in 1961 she boldly invited the first non-

family members to join the Board. David Solinger, her successor as President, had helped ease the way toward this decision by founding the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1956. The Friends were tremendously successful in bringing new support and many important works of art to the Museum. We "outsiders" feel deeply grateful to join the family of this great institution.

Taking the reins from David Solinger, Howard Lipman guided the Museum with consummate skill. He and his wife, Jean, were extraordinarily generous, helping the Whitney build one of the great collections of 20th-century American sculpture. Flora Biddle, whom we honor tonight, succeeded Howard as President; her phenomenal ability to communicate her passion for the Museum and what it represents continues to set an example for staff and Trustees alike. Bill Woodside, my immediate predecessor, helped the Museum in countless ways, particularly by instituting the sound business practices necessary to maintain the Museum's financial health.

As we celebrate the Whitney's illustrious past, we can also look forward to a splendid future. David Ross and Fiona Donovan bring renewed energy and vitality to the tasks that lie ahead. Mrs. Whitney's mandate to encourage and promote American art and artists and to educate the public is happily still in force, and its importance is undiminished. Through radical growth and change, the Whitney Museum has never lost sight of its founder's vision, and I trust it never will.

LEONARD A. LAUDER, *President*

An American Original

On the occasion of our sixtieth anniversary, the Whitney Museum of American Art has plenty to celebrate. From 1914, when Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney founded the Whitney Studio, through the opening of the Museum in 1931, and down to the present day, the spirit and purpose of this institution have never wavered. This Museum has always been a gathering place for people whose energies are focused on the appreciation and celebration of American art. But the heart of the Museum is a renowned Permanent Collection housed in one of the world's great modern museum buildings, a distinguished record of exhibitions and publications that continue to challenge and educate the growing international audience for American art, and a firm commitment to artists and their immeasurable value in our society.

At sixty, the Museum is fortunate to have a tremendously talented and extraordinarily dedicated staff that shares the driving determination of Juliana Force, the first Director. Mrs. Whitney's vision and generosity have been passed on to a broad-based community of men and women, led by the

Museum's Board of Trustees and joined by thousands of others who support the Museum as members, patrons, and volunteers. Approximately 1,000 individual donors have given nearly 10,000 works of art to the Museum for our Permanent Collection of paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, and photographs.

But the celebration of significant anniversaries should be more than a mere acknowledgment of past accomplishments. Anniversaries should provide the opportunity for serious reflection and speculation. For the Museum's need for constancy—its need to be seen as a site for certain types of social and intellectual continuity—is not mutually exclusive of its need for renewal. In fact, imbedded in the soul of this Museum is an openness to change—especially artistic innovation. This embrace of the new and unpopular is perhaps the only truly immutable quality of the Whitney Museum.

As a result, the Whitney Museum remains unfettered, free to pursue its unique mission as a museum of American art. It can act passionately, yet responsibly; remain steadfast in its dedication to artists, yet flexible enough to respond to their changing needs. This Museum remains very much a living entity. It is this vitality that is cherished by artists and the adventurous and chided by those who prefer their museums less animate.

At a difficult time in the life of our city, and a troubled time for many in the nation, the staff and support community of the Whitney Museum recognize that our responsibilities are evolving, and we must confront the intellectual, social, and economic challenges ahead with courage, conviction, and a sense of joy. As a Museum devoted to American art of the twentieth century,

we have a virtual obligation to reconsider what we have seen and learned: what it means to be a museum of American art, as well as what it means to be an American museum at the end of the twentieth century. It is our responsibility to examine a century of this nation's artistic evolution, learn from its failures and delight in its achievements. Breaking with traditions born in a different era, we must explore our heritage in an international context and help our visitors understand its rich complexity.

When the Museum was established, it was truly an alternative for art lovers. In 1931, few museums would even recognize the unique qualities of American art. The Whitney Museum was alone in welcoming this art and championing it in the face of critical hostility. One of the few institutions willing to specialize in the art of our times, the Whitney has helped fight the good fight on numerous fronts in the modernist conflict. Never a follower, the Museum has always charted its own course and will continue to do so.

Times have changed, and the nature of the challenge has changed as well. We must recall that our founding initiative was closely associated with the courage to delight in the new, while refusing to accept a fixed version of history. Tonight, as we celebrate sixty extraordinary years of the Whitney Museum's contribution to the support of American art, let us renew our commitment to the ideals that continue to empower this remarkable institution.

Happy anniversary to the Whitney Museum, an American original from day one!

DAVID A. ROSS, *Director*

What's in a Name

THIS MUSEUM is the embodiment of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Its name is not egotistic, but a symbol of her profound belief in America and in her country's art and artists. When Gertrude Whitney herself became an artist, around the turn of the century, she was distressed to find that there existed almost no interest in or appreciation of American artists or their work. It was her nature to act when she saw a need, and so in 1907 she started showing the work of her fellow artists in her studio on 8th Street. In 1914 the Whitney Studio became the first precursor of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

My grandmother thus accepted the responsibilities of her money and social position by becoming a patron, and of her talent by developing it and working extremely hard to make sculpture and obtain commissions—the only way, at that time, sculptors could get their work out of the studio and into the world. She was completely dedicated to being an artist, and to helping her fellow artists gain recognition for their work.

She provided a welcome, a gathering place, for artists. Even the curators, in the early days, were artists. Her buildings on

8th Street contained a library and a squash court along with studios and galleries; at the frequent openings, hearty sandwiches were served to hungry artists along with large drinks. The museum had the character of an inviting home, with colorful walls, beautiful rugs and curtains, and comfortable furniture. As American art became recognized and valued, the number of artists and commercial galleries grew, and this aspect of the museum seemed less important—but for me its memory still glows like a rainbow: a promise and a sign. After Gertrude Whitney's death, no one could personify the Museum in that unique way.

Gertrude's daughter, Flora Whitney Miller, came as close as anyone could. She ensured the museum's existence, in honor and in memory of her mother, although Gertrude had left it to her freely, telling her that she could either keep it or sell it. This heritage brought her both pain and joy—she did not want to be a public figure or an artist, and she did not have the same resources as her parents. She supported the directors and the curators wholeheartedly, and as American art became more accepted she was happy in the knowledge that the Museum had played a major role in this turn of events. She was pleased that new friends were helping the Museum to move ahead, wanted to know them all, and was deeply interested in both familiar and newer artists. She delighted us with tales of the old days on 8th Street—childhood picnics in her mother's studio, playing in Macdougal Alley with young Navahos who were models for a neighboring artist, and her favorite gala parties at Juliana Force's apartment after openings.

My mother captivated everyone with her warmth, elegance, and sense of fun. She chaired meetings with grace and charm, never revealing how she agonized over that role, praising and thanking each Trustee and always the Director. She loved the openings and dressed in her best, whether for Hopper or the Biennial—a black Chanel suit, pearls, a tiny hat from Paulette; or, for the evening, slacks and jacket covered in shiny black paillettes. The flame shone bright during the quarter of a century she led the Museum she loved and felt responsible for.

My mother passed on to me a precious heritage: her feeling for the Museum. She did this in many ways—through her own collection, always growing; by making it clear that it was important for her to spend time at the Museum even when her children were young; later, by taking me with her, and eventually by arranging for me to work here, first on the artists' files, and then at the front desk, and finally as a Trustee. She imbued in me her deep respect for the professionals who are responsible for the programs, especially for the directors, whose central role and authority she supported with admiration and pleasure. I remember her awe of the artists, of their work. She tried to answer my doubts about an Ivan Albright painting of a putrefying figure, and to encourage me to open my mind to my first Jackson Pollock, when the Museum was still on 8th Street. Walking through George Segal's installation here, in her eighties, she stepped delicately over disembodied arms, legs, and heads, questioning George about a WALK / DON'T WALK sign or the new deep blue he was starting to use. She was curious and involved until the very end of her life.

It was very hard for her to ask for the money that was needed. She herself had made up the deficit year after year, as her mother had, although she could not really afford to, and asking others was an admission that the family could no longer support the Museum. Besides that, she was shy. When my time came to lead, I had less resources than my forebears, and wanted to find good people who would care for this Museum in the tradition of my mother and grandmother. I imagined a diverse group representing our great city, gathered as a family, deliberating, differing, and making big plans enthusiastically and joyfully. We would do all *we* could to keep bright the flame. The great amount of money needed would be given freely, with confidence and affection, in the spirit of Gertrude, of this Museum, and this country. Thus, the Museum would become a great public institution, the pride of our country, yet would keep its intimacy, its heart and soul.

I was privileged to work with a brilliant Director who loved the Whitney, who had energy and spirit comparable to that of our first Director, Juliana Force. His sense of the Whitney's history and his high standards of quality informed his grand and glorious vision of its future. He hoped, in this building and in one to be built next door, to tell the story of American art in a logical, lively, intelligent installation, juxtaposed with illuminating temporary exhibitions of both contemporary and earlier art. Speaking in favor of the Museum's expansion program in 1984, Victor Ganz, beloved key Trustee until his death in 1987, said of Tom Armstrong's leadership years: "those in the art world . . . love the Whitney—they love its open-minded and open-handed approach—they love its daring and its generosity

of spirit—they love its friendliness and its guts. . . . It's really amazing! The opportunities for the Whitney are greater than ever."

The Museum has always meant the best to me—of America, of contemporary art, of people, and of good times.

I have been blessed to meet most of the artists, and have felt awed, excited, disturbed, challenged, and amused by their work, and extremely grateful for the extraordinary dimension their creations and they themselves have given to my life. They are the heart and soul and lifeblood of this Museum.

I have been honored to know all its secretaries, editors, guards, preparators, directors, curators, watchmen, everyone who has ever worked within its three buildings or its four branches. They have preserved the Museum's traditions, caring for buildings and art and people, at the same time as they have daringly moved it forward. Their true dedication, outstanding ability, and adventurousness have inspired me; their friendship has delighted and sustained me.

I have known every Trustee of this institution, and many have become treasured friends, family really. I take this occasion to thank them publicly and profoundly for their wisdom, patience, devotion, money, and art. They will surely need these precious things in the years ahead, for they have undertaken the big challenge of nurturing the Museum as it moves forward toward the millennium. Only they will decide which traditions and values are worth keeping, and which should be changed or discarded. May they be justly rewarded for their generosity and vision by the same joy to which my grandmother referred when, speaking on CBS radio, she opened the first Whitney Museum of

American Art, standing in its sculpture gallery with Governor Al Smith, Congressman Robert Low Bacon, and Otto Kahn:

> *In making this gift to you, the American public, my chief desire is that you should share with me the joy which I have received from these works of art. It is especially in times like these that we need to look to the spiritual. In art we find it.*

These are words for today, too. I believe them. I have been blessed with the same joy of which Gertrude spoke, received from works of art deeply experienced at the Museum she founded sixty years ago. Her gift has been multiplied many times over, thanks to hundreds of artists and thousands of patrons of the Whitney Museum of American Art. May their numbers ever increase! May that joy sustain us through good times and bad, enabling us to see more clearly, feel more deeply, and act more thoughtfully.

Today, I am happy to see David Ross leading the Museum with vitality, imagination, and dedication to contemporary art and artists. I am happy that my daughter Fiona Donovan has joined the Board of Trustees, bringing her clear-eyed vision and intelligence, her training as a scholar in art history, and a fourth-generation tradition to her task.

The Whitney looks different—but it always has, and I hope it always will! What must remain is the spirit of adventure, faith in the necessity of art, and love.

FLORA BIDDLE, *Chairman*

Farewell

LOOKING BACK over the years, I find it hard to recollect the circumstances that led to my being honored by an invitation to join the Board of Trustees of the Whitney Museum. Is it possible that there was, in fact, no such invitation? Did I perhaps simply wander one day into the gray-stone-walled dungeon that is the meeting room of the Board of Trustees and, finding an agreeable group of people seated there, decide to join them? Is it further possible that for their part the Trustees were simply too nice, as well as too dumbfounded, to ask me to leave? And so I returned year after year and the Board grew so used to my presence among them as to feel an uneasy sense of something having gone awry when I happened to be absent. I had become for them like a mild ache somewhere in the body which by its persistence has become a sort of companion and which would be missed if the condition causing it were one day to be cured. At any rate, this is an explanation that strikes me as more reasonable than any other, and at the Whitney, contrary to the gossip one hears out in the barbarian world, reasonableness is constantly sought after and much prized.

The truth is that as a museum we would not have lasted as long as we have if a hard core of reasonableness had not existed back of the high spirits with which we pursue excellence in the work of living American artists old and young, black and white, male and female, tall and short, fat and thin. (Statistically, there are more thin Whitney artists than fat ones. Nobody knows why.) Sometimes our exuberant chance-taking offends the sullen nay-sayers huddled beyond our doors; so much the worse for them! In one of his great poems, Yeats speaks of his circus animals being all on show. Well, we, too, have our gorgeous circus animals, frisky and gifted, and we have not feared to bring them into this superb arena and prompt them to leap through rings of fire and turn brave somersaults at the top of the tent and even, from time to time, sink their teeth into the flesh of an unwary ringmaster-curator. For biting the hand that feeds you is also reasonable, though painful to the bitten. Gratitude is the least natural of emotions, and therefore the hardest to express, the hardest to accept.

Granted that this is the case, still, I must put myself and my former colleagues to the test. I urge them to accept my gratitude for the many happy years in which they have allowed me to participate in their palavers. I calculate that in the course of these occasions I have worn out the upholstery on two and a half chairs, have used up a hundred and two pads of scratch paper, and have drunk sixty-seven bottles of soda water. Now I step down, not without a certain sadness, in obedience to a principle whose value I have long defended: the principle that the old must yield place to the young, and not because of age alone—we

old people all think of ourselves as twenty-six—but because change itself possesses a high intrinsic value. Tennyson said that we must consent to change "lest one good custom should corrupt the world." I am a champion of that paradox and so its eager if somewhat rueful victim. I hope that the sense of me as a mild ache in the body of the Board will remain for a little while in that gray-stone-walled dungeon upstairs. Meanwhile, I will go on cherishing the Whitney and serving it as best I can from whatever unofficial and, I suspect, unupholstered perch I may be permitted to occupy.

BRENDAN GILL
Chairman, Library Fellows of the Whitney Museum of American Art

Directors

David A. Ross	1991–
Jennifer Russell (Acting Director)	1990–91
Thomas N. Armstrong III	1974–90
John I.H. Baur	1968–74
Lloyd Goodrich	1958–68
Hermon More	1948–58
Juliana Force	1930–48

Trustees Past and Present

Juliana Force
November 1935 – August 1948

Frank L. Crocker
November 1935 – June 1945

William Adams Delano
November 1935 – March 1936

Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney
November 1935 – February 1971

Flora Whitney Miller
November 1935 – July 1986

Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney
March 1936 – April 1942

G. Macculloch Miller
June 1942 – September 1972

Walter G. Dunnington
June 1945 – October 1963

Barbara Whitney Headley
September 1949 – May 1962

Flora Miller Biddle
January 1958 –

Hermon More
September 1958 – May 1962

Arthur G. Altschul
July 1961 – October 1980

John I.H. Baur
July 1961 – September 1974

B.H. Friedman
July 1961 – May 1978

Lloyd Goodrich
July 1961 – May 1975

Michael H. Irving
July 1961 – May 1980

Roy R. Neuberger
July 1961 – February 1969

David M. Solinger
July 1961 –

Alan H. Temple
October 1961 – May 1975

Armand G. Erpf
May 1962 – February 1971

W. Barklie McKee Henry
May 1962 – May 1977

Mrs. John F. Kennedy
December 1962 – June 1968

Benno C. Schmidt
April 1964 – June 1984

Robert W. Sarnoff
September 1964 – October 1974

Henry F. du Pont
November 1964 – April 1969

Mrs. Laurance S. Rockefeller
April 1965 – May 1989

Mrs. John Hay Whitney
June 1965 – 1971

Susan Morse Hilles
June 1969 – May 1979

Howard W. Lipman
June 1969 –

William M. White, Jr.
June 1969 – May 1974

Laurence A. Tisch
September 1971 – February 1981

Thomas M.C. Johnston
November 1972 – May 1975

Steven Muller
November 1972 – June 1983

Charles Simon
November 1972 –

Thomas N. Armstrong III
January 1974 – March 1990

Stephen E. Weil
January 1974 – August 1974

Lawrence H. Bloedel
April 1975 – November 1976

Daniel R. Childs
April 1975 – January 1980

Joel S. Ehrenkranz
April 1975 –

William A. Marsteller
April 1975 – June 1984

Norborne Berkeley, Jr.
September 1975 – June 1982

Sandra Payson
September 1975 – June 1985

Jules D. Prown
October 1975 –

Frances A. Lewis
October 1976 – May 1980

Robert F. Greenhill
January 1977 –

Leonard A. Lauder
January 1977 –

Geanie Faulkner
March 1977 – June 1982

Edwin A. Bergman
April 1977 – June 1983

Sondra Gilman Gonzalez-Falla
April 1977 –

Berthe Kolin
April 1977 –

Robert W. Wilson
January 1978 –

Barbara B. Millhouse
May 1978 – June 1984

George Weissman
March 1979 – June 1991

William S. Woodside
March 1979 –

Wilfred P. Cohen
September 1979 – June 1990

Brendan Gill
September 1979 – June 1991

Raymond J. Learsy
May 1980 –

Victor W. Ganz
February 1981 – October 1987

Martin Gruss
February 1981 – June 1985

Elizabeth M. Petrie
April 1981 – June 1991

A. Alfred Taubman
June 1981 –

Mrs. Thomas M. Evans
April 1982 – September 1983

George S. Kaufman
April 1982 –

Faith G. Golding
April 1982 –

Elizabeth J. McCormack
October 1982 – June 1987

Henry Kaufman
June 1983 –

Gilbert C. Maurer
November 1983 –

Stephen E. O'Neil
November 1983 –

C. Lawson Reed
November 1983 – June 1990

Joan Hardy Clark
June 1984 –

Leslie H. Wexner
June 1984 – June 1990

Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo
April 1985 –

Beth Rudin DeWoody
April 1985 –

Benjamin D. Holloway
April 1985 – December 1990

Frederick B. Henry
December 1986 –

Adriana Mnuchin
December 1986 –

Emily Fisher Landau
January 1987 –

Ana R. Daniel
June 1988 –

Nancy Brown Wellin
June 1988 –

Jennifer Russell
March 1990 – February 1991

Fiona Donovan
September 1990 –

Arthur Fleischer, Jr.
September 1990 –

Robert Sosnick
September 1990 –

David A. Ross
February 1991 –

S. Roger Horchow
June 1991 –

500 COPIES

This Sixtieth Anniversary Celebration keepsake
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